

THE NATION

House Moving to Tighten Immigration

The Republican bill focuses on border security and law enforcement and omits a guest-worker plan favored by Bush.

By Mary Curtius

Times Staff Writer

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WASHINGTON — The House Republican leadership overcame resistance within its deeply divided ranks Thursday and pushed toward a final vote today on sweeping legislation to crack down on illegal immigrants and beef up border security.

The bill is believed likely to pass the House on a largely party-line vote. But its fate in the Senate is uncertain because it ignores calls by President Bush and some House and Senate Republicans for a guest-worker program that would temporarily legalize the status of millions of illegal workers. Bush has repeatedly called for a comprehensive approach to overhauling the immigration laws.

With the debate over immigration increasingly prominent around the country, both the president and key members of both parties have been pressing for a way to balance the desire to control the illegal influx of individuals across the borders with the business community's need for workers to take low-paying jobs that U.S. citizens are reluctant to do. Thursday's struggle in the House illustrated that disagreements over what to do are extensive and heartfelt.

The House bill's approach is based primarily on making it harder to illegally enter the country and tougher for anyone who enters illegally to get a job. It would make overstaying a visa, now a civil offense, a federal crime, and would require employers to check the legal status of all their workers with the Department of Homeland Security. Employers who knowingly hire illegal workers would run the risk of paying high fines.

Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) has said the Senate will take up immigration reform in February and will consider both enforcement and border security measures and a guest-worker program.

After laying the groundwork for months for its legislation, the House Republican leadership thought it could achieve consensus among the party's rank and file by limiting its proposal to border security and law enforcement measures. Instead, a procedural vote early Thursday brought to the House floor the different approaches to immigration issues that have roiled the party since Bush endorsed a guest-worker program — which opponents consider a form of amnesty — early in his presidency.

Rep. Jim Kolbe (R-Ariz.), who supports a guest-worker program, said he opposed the House bill because it did "nothing to solve the real problems of illegal immigration. In fact, it's worse than nothing."

Kolbe and other Republicans warned that they would vote against the measure, with some saying it was too tough and others saying it was not tough enough. Still others said they opposed rushing such sweeping reform through at the end of the session. The Republican opponents were joined by a parade of Democrats who said the bill was anti-immigrant and would not solve immigration problems.

Alarmed, the Republican leadership delayed a vote for several hours as they met privately with Republican lawmakers, appealing to them for support. "It was intense," said Rep. Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.), who backs a

guest-worker program and unsuccessfully lobbied to include a non-binding resolution supporting such a proposal in the bill. "This is a tough one."

Ultimately, party unity was reestablished and the procedural vote passed, allowing debate on more than a dozen proposed amendments. Among them was one, offered by Rep. Duncan Hunter (R-El Cajon), to build nearly 700 miles of security fencing along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Twenty-two miles of that fence would be build in eastern San Diego County, about 10 miles east and west of Tecate, and 361 miles between Calexico and Douglas, Ariz. Hunter said the Calexico-Douglas section of the border "is one of the most heavily trafficked in both illegal aliens and drugs."

Hunter's amendment passed easily, 260-159, although Democrats denounced it as a plan to erect a 21st century Berlin Wall between the United States and its neighbors.

In the California delegation, Democrats Dennis Cardoza of Atwater and Jim Costa of Fresno joined all the Republicans in favoring the proposal; all other Democrats voted against it.

The open disagreement that fractured the normally well-disciplined House Republican majority underscored how volatile an issue immigration reform has become for the GOP. The party is struggling to assuage the fears of voters who complain that the government has lost control of the borders, even as it tries to avoid alienating the business community and the Latino voters the White House has assiduously courted.

Supporters of the House Republican leadership's legislation described it as a first step that was needed to help convince Americans that the government is serious about gaining control of its borders and fixing a broken immigration policy. About 11 million people are in the United States illegally.

"Until the borders are protected we cannot have any kind of meaningful immigration reform," said Rep. Peter T. King (R-N.Y.), chairman of the Homeland Security Committee, who wrote the border security portion of the bill.

The legislation "represents a crucial step forward in securing our borders and protecting the lives and property of the American people," said Rep. Lamar Smith (R-Texas), contending that the bill would combat the smuggling of illegal immigrants into the United States and "result in more individuals being held accountable for breaking immigration laws."

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the U.S. Council of Catholic Bishops and the American Bar Assn. have all criticized the bill as draconian.

"This bill is unacceptable to the business community," Randel Johnson, vice president for labor, immigration and employee benefits with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, said in a conference call with reporters.

He described as unworkable the bill's requirement that employers check their workers' legal status with the Department of Homeland Security. Johnson said the chamber could support a plan that more gradually phased in verification and restricted it to new hires.

GOP activist Grover Norquist predicted that the bill was "not a piece of legislation that is going to pass the Senate and be signed by the president.... This is just the House starting a debate."

Still, Norquist said, the party must take care not to go too far and appear to be taking an anti-immigrant stance that Democrats could use against it in the 2006 elections.

Indeed, Democrats repeatedly berated Republicans on Thursday for what they said was the GOP's attack

on the nation's immigrant heritage.

"We need to ask ourselves what kind of America we want: Do we want an America where we have mass deportations? Do we want an America where police officers can randomly ask foreign-looking Americans to produce identification to prove their legal status?" asked Rep. Linda T. Sanchez (D-Lakewood). "As the daughter of immigrants, I am offended by this bill."

The White House said Thursday that it strongly supported the legislation, issuing a statement welcoming provisions that would end the practice of "catch and release," which allows illegal immigrants from countries other than Mexico to be cited to appear in court and then freed, and would grant the Department of Homeland Security greater powers to apprehend illegal immigrants. The White House did not, however, endorse the provision requiring all employers to check their workers' legal status.

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Times staff writer Nicole Gaouette contributed to this report.